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A GUNS Magazine Exposé

BACKFIRE!

By SHELLEY BRAVERMAN

An evaluation of the investigation into the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as related to firearms and forensic ballistics

EDITOR'S NOTE

The author, Shelley Braverman, is well known to readers of GUNS Magazine for his regular column, "An Inside Look," and his participation on our "Panel of Experts." However, probably not many readers are aware of his extensive background as a firearms consultant. Braverman has acted as a qualified firearms expert in more than 100 court cases in the U.S. and abroad. He is a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and the International Association for Identification. His private laboratory is furnished with a reference collection of about 300 firearms, a complete optical section with four microscopes and specialized camera equipment, and a research library of more than 1,000 books and publications. Braverman is author of the section of the Encyclopaedia Britannica "Criminal Investigation; Firearms."

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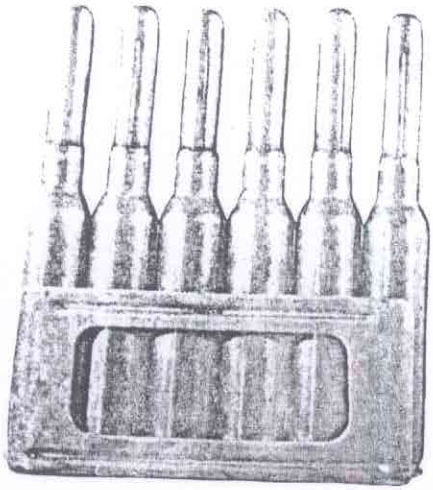

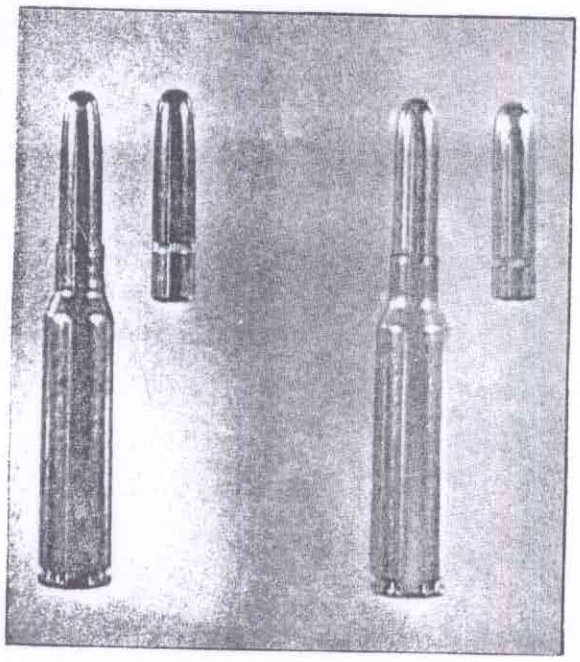

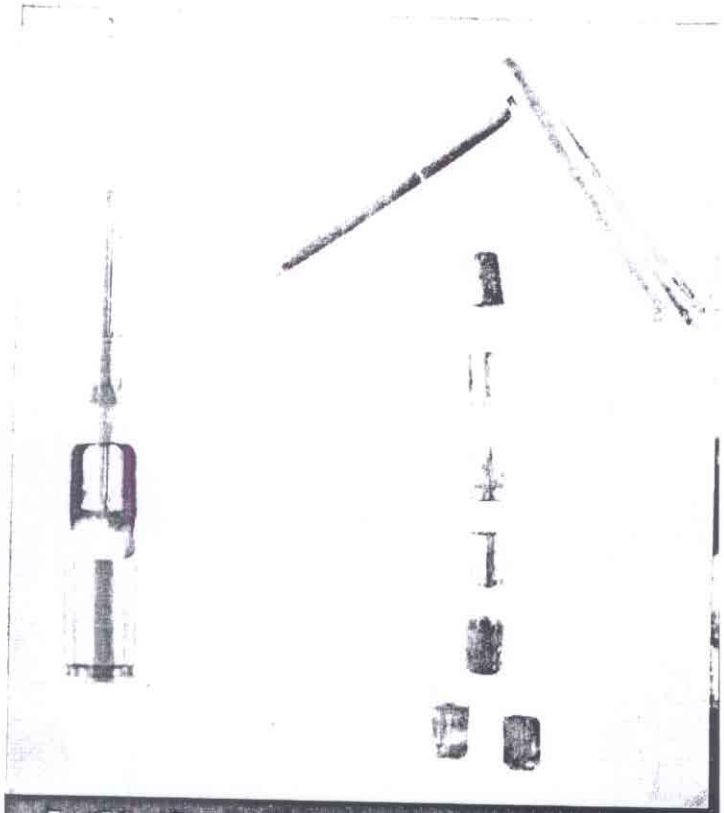

Is this the bullet that killed Kennedy?

Above: Mitrgliada bullet shown in cutaway case (left), and the bullet opened, exposing "cannister" contents. Lead cylinders weigh 40-45 grains, and are composed of two sections, which sometimes separate (see bottom pair). Top section is either lead, hardened with antimony, or is sometimes jacketed. Complete bullet weighs 263 gr.

Left: Original 6.5 Carcano case (left) "re-bulleted" with soft nose hunting bullet—without resizing. Next to this is a Western 6.5 Carcano case with military bullet. Full clip of Mitrgliadas shown at top, left.

The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22, 1963, was a cruel and shocking act of violence directed against a man, a family, a nation, and against all mankind.

WITH THESE WORDS, the "President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy" began its report—some 883 pages of fact, speculation, error, and theory. The Warren Commission, created to "evaluate all the facts and circumstances surrounding the assassination . . ."will long be remembered—not for what its report contained, but for what it omitted; not for the questions it answered, but for those it left unanswered; not for the mysteries it solved, but for those it created.

The usual way to handle a "hot potato" that has political angles is to appoint a committee and ride out the storm. This was done in the Sacco-Vanzetti case (the Lowell Committee) and in the more recent Pearl Harbor scandal (the Roberts Committee).

The Kennedy assassination triggered the Warren Commission, which wasted little time in turning on the stupidity. In its clumsy efforts to calm more than half of the civilized world, it dropped the ball—and this fumble raised more questions than it answered—thus the Warren Commission joined two famous predecessors as failures.

The very real tragedy is that its inept gyrations actually worked against its own purpose; obvious errors—if not in fact, at least in judgement—made suspect much which was

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originally acceptable. As its study progressed, the Warren Commission encountered evidence that it *felt* was in conflict with its hope for a simple explanation, i.e., that Oswald, alone, was the assassin. Actually, this was not necessary: competent investigation by firearms experts would have made unprofitable much of the illiterate trash spawned by status-seeking "researchers."

Of the many blunders attributed to the Commission's hearings, possibly the greatest dereliction was the failure of the Commission to appoint a vigorous "Devil's Advocate" or cross-examiner. Use of expert witnesses presents terrible dangers, and cross-examination is absolutely essential if truth is to be approached. The witnesses may swear to tell ". . . the whole truth," etc., but this is limited to the actual questions asked. Expert testimony without cross-examination can result in little more than compurgation. If the expert witnesses had been cross-examined by properly coached counsel, it is more than likely that the shadows now hanging over this mess would have disappeared long ago—particularly in regard to firearms.

When compared to the scope of the investigation—the 10 months of work and the 26 volumes of testimony—the lack of quality and limitations of the firearms intelligence are shocking.

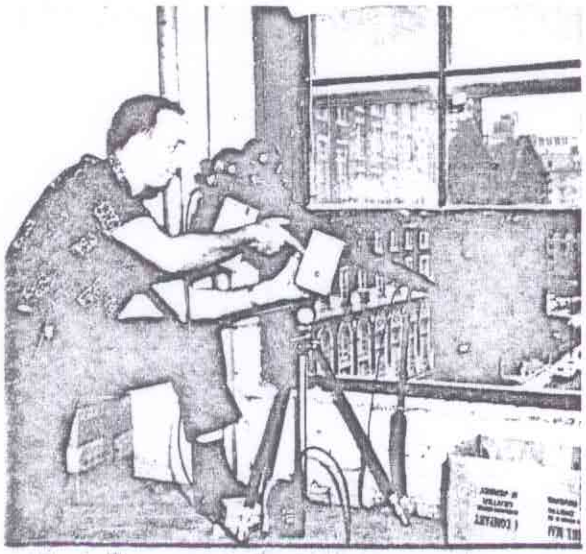
Experts are expert only in their specific fields. A fingerprint expert is an expert on prints, not fingers; for a problem involving fingers one should consult a physician. A firearms identification expert is actually a "bullet print" expert, *not a firearms expert*. The results of this confusion are sometimes pathetic. In the Sacco-Vanzetti case, an identification expert with 20 years experience did not know how to field strip his own gun, a Colt Pocket Auto! On another occasion, the Commanding Officer of the Ballistics Squad of one of our largest cities did not know that one might look for efflorescence around a primer to distinguish between discharged shells found inside a store and another alleged to have been exposed to the elements for a week.

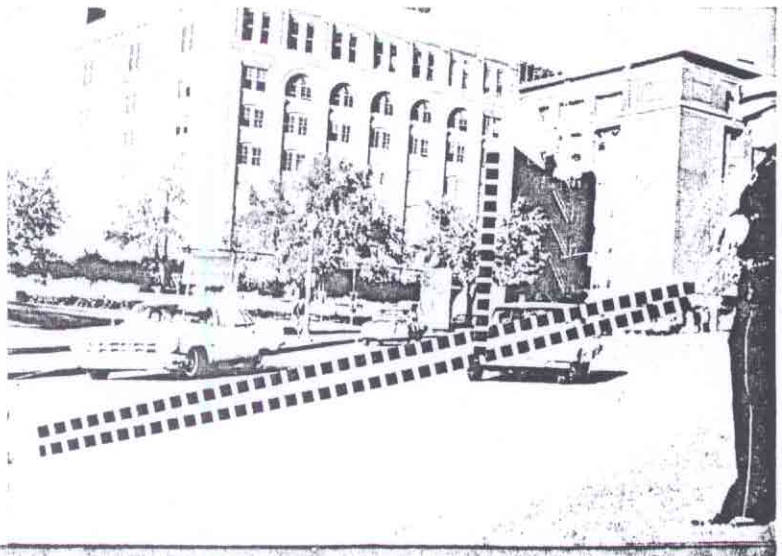
Contradictions are more apparent than real. Had the Commission retained *firearms* experts in addition to firearms *identification* experts, avenues for study would have been suggested which should have resulted in more—if not complete—clarification and more satisfaction.

When errors are encountered in a report, the entire document becomes suspect immediately: when errors are unwarranted—in that they indicate inefficiency—they are inexcusable.

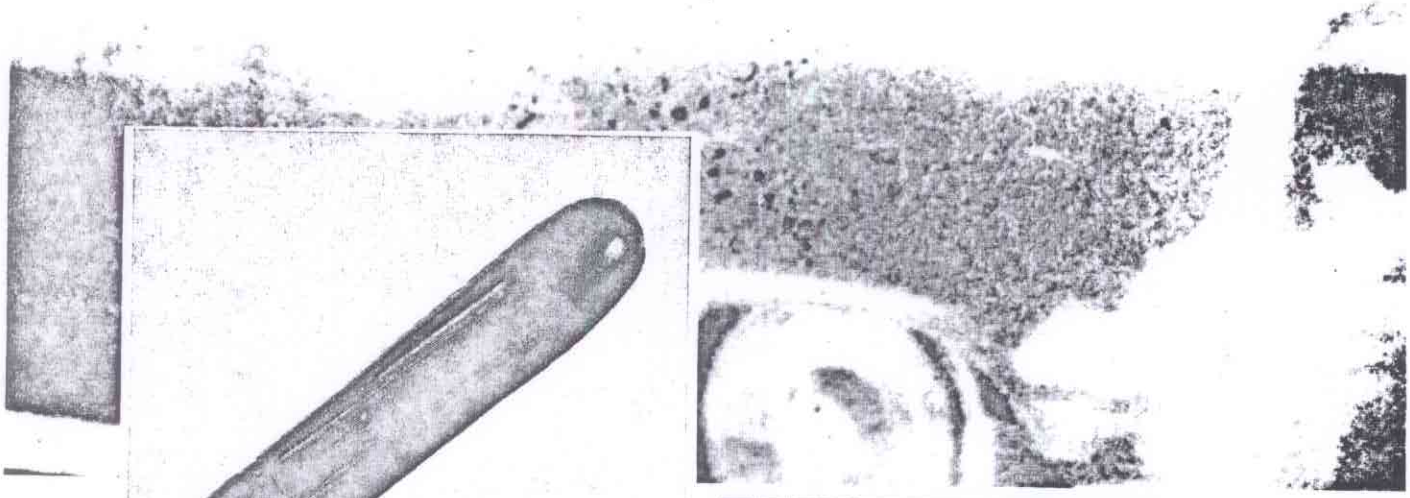
The Warren Report would have us believe that one bullet—the one and only completely whole bullet in evidence—followed this course: it entered the President's back (or neck?), bruised the top portion of the right lung and ripped the windpipe as it left. It then entered Governor Connally's back, traversed the chest and shattered his fifth rib, then went on to strike the bone in the Governor's wrist, exit, and enter his thigh. However, upon examination of this bullet, it was found to be in "pristine" condition! This bullet, according to the Report, was found at Parkland Hospital, and "on Governor Connally's stretcher." How easy it might have been to confirm this conclusion—but before this bullet arrived at the FBI Laboratory, "it was washed with Hydrosol, a blood solvent;" thus eliminating any possible attempt at blood tests or groupings which might have determined if it had passed through either the President or Governor Connally, or both—or neither.

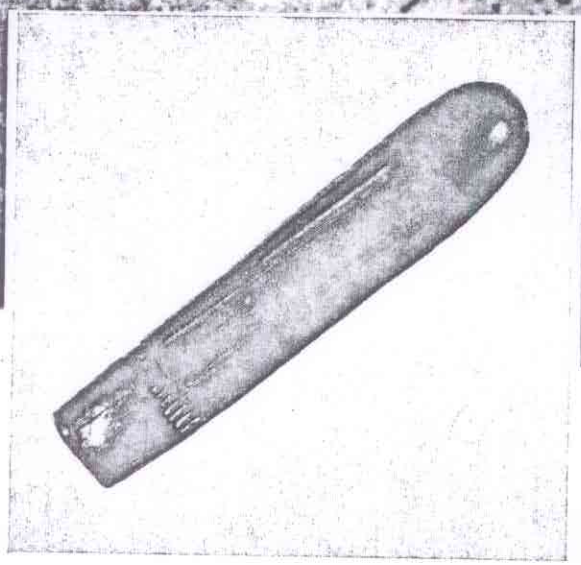
To this day, the Warren Commission has not been able to prove exactly how many shots were fired at a President of the United States in broad daylight, in the presence of numerous government officials including trained secret service agents, assorted police personnel, and hundreds of spectators. Two shots have, in the opinion of the Commission, been accounted for; one striking the President and Governor, and the other causing the President's head wound. A third shot is said to have missed, both the car and its occupants. Also, three empty cases from the Carcano rifle were found on the *(Continued on page 56)*





Left: When reenacting the assassination, why was rifle placed on tripod rather than "gunrest" box? Right: Officer points to spot on ground hit by bullet—or was it really a fragment of a Mitrgliada?





Q *Why was evidence bullet (above) washed before it was sent to FBI Laboratory? How could it have lost only 2.4 grains and left fragments weighing more than three grains in Gov. Connally's wrist?*

Q *Lt. Day of the Dallas Police is shown carrying evidence rifle. Why did he withhold "Oswald's palmprint" from the FBI for four days? How could rifle, which was described as "not conducive to recording a good print" produce the palmprint reportedly found on barrel?*

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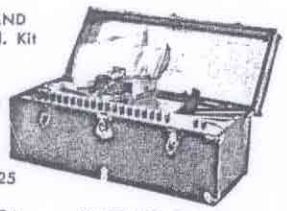

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(Continued from page 21)

floor of the School Book Depository, and a live round was found in the chamber. The Carcano requires a clip, and is packet-loaded, like the Garand. The clip holds six cartridges, yet only four are in evidence. If Oswald could buy four cartridges, why not six; indeed, why not a full box? It is curious that little or no effort has been recorded by the Commission to trace Oswald's purchase of the ammunition. No other rounds were found in a search of his person or residences.

After hearing testimony concerning the examination of the bullets and cases, the Commission assumed that they were original military cartridges, loaded with full-patch bullets. They also assumed that the cartridges were not reloaded, because they were not resized. It is commonplace for shooters to pull military full-jacketed bullets and replace them with soft point bullets, without resizing.

Some 25 years ago, in Italian East Africa, I encountered the 6.5 Carcano cartridge in a wide variety of loadings. The illustrated Mitrgliadas are those which I brought back. Let's look at some of the mysteries of the assassination, and see how such a load fits in.

Senator Ralph Yarborough said that the smell of gunpowder "clung to the car nearly all the way to the hospital." The Mitrgliada, if it had been fired in test reenactments, would have shown how this was possible. The 263-grain bullet used in this load requires the use of a tuft of Kapok or cotton, fragments of which usually travel several yards, carrying burning powder grains.

Oswald's rifle was said to be shooting high and right when tested. These tests were made with the 160-grain Western military bullets; but would not the rifle have been perfectly zeroed in when shooting different bullet weights, the 263 grain Mitrgliada, for example?

If the Commission had tested the Mitrgliada or similar bullets for penetration and fragmentation, the results might have shown how a single assassin could have shot the President and the Governor with fragments of a single Mitrgliada, then each of them separately with a full-patch military bullet.

Another mystery the Mitrgliada might have solved is that of the ricochet which injured a bystander during the assassination. The FBI Laboratory ran a spectrograph test on the smears on the curbstone and came up with a "positive" for lead and antimony—but there was no trace of copper, and the Commission was stymied. When the Mitrgliada breaks up, its slugs are freed from the brass jacket, and they could fly off in any direction: is this the answer to the curb-stone smear?

One other aspect of the small cylindrical sections of the Mitrgliada is that each section is composed of two halves. They are compressed together, and some separate and some do not. When they do, each fragment weighs about 20-22 grains. Two of the fragments recovered from the President's head wound weighed 11 grains and 21 grains respectively. This, in itself, is startling—but when considered in the light of the other Mitrgliada characteristics, it is almost beyond reasonable coincidence!

There are many questions concerning all aspects of the assassination yet to be answered. But since our interest lies in the ballistics and firearm factors, let us study some of the inconsistencies of the investigation in this area.

Testing of the Rifle

In an effort to test the accuracy and speed of firing, the FBI and the Infantry Weapons Evaluation Branch of the United States Army fired Oswald's Carcano more than 100 times. It is difficult to explain why the evidence rifle itself had to be used in these tests. Certainly a duplicate of the Carcano was available, and many of the tests could have been performed with this duplicate. Firing an evidence gun more than the two or three times necessary to obtain specimens for microscopic comparison is not only improper, it is incomprehensible—the bullet-ballistic evidence of the gun after repeated firing has been destroyed *forever*.

During the test firing of the Carcano to see if an assassin could fire the three shots within a certain time span, it is evident that the riflemen were not stationed in position identical to that of the alleged assassin. They did not fire from the kneeling position; fire at a moving target; use a rifle loaded with only four cartridges; or fire through an opening approximating the size of the partially opened window. The function of a test is to test *identical* situations and circumstances.

The Paper Bag

The Warren Report contends that Oswald disassembled the Carcano rifle and carried it into the School Book Depository in a home-made paper bag which measured 38" in length. The Carcano rifle measures 40" overall when completely assembled; the longest of its two parts, the stock, is 35". The report does not explain why Oswald made the bag 38" instead of 40" long; why the five inch difference was important enough to require disassembly and reassembly of the rifle; and

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Most important, how the various parts of the gun with sharp steel corners were transported from the Paine house in Irving, Texas, to the School Book Depository without leaving any tears or marks in the bag. Yet the FBI supplemental report of January 13, 1964 states: ". . . the bag was examined for any evidence of the outline of a rifle, but no significant indentations were found." There is a 91/38 Carcano that would fit into the paper bag without being disassembled; the Moschetto version is four inches shorter than the evidence gun. Did Oswald have more than one Carcano?

Other Controversial Points

One of the Commission witnesses, in speaking of the telescopic sight, said it was "a real aid, an extreme aid" in rapid fire shooting. The evidence rifle was fitted with a cheap 4x18 scope of low light-gathering power with a restricted field of view (about the length of the Presidential car at 60 yards). Such a scope would be about the slowest setup for rapid fire shooting generally encountered. It is also claimed that the assassin was sitting or kneeling—the two positions least suitable for rapid fire.

Also, in regard to the shooting capabilities of the rifle and Oswald, the Commission would have us believe that he missed a stationary target (General Walker) at short range, but twice hit a moving target about the size of a grapefruit—at more than 60 yards!

Mention should be made of the careless handling of evidence in this, one of the most important cases of our history. Why was the Presidential car apparently cleaned before any expert examination was made; and why did it take two separate searches to uncover bullet fragments? Why were Governor Connally's clothes cleaned and pressed before any microscopic examination was made? Why did investigators fail to make any effort to trace the sources of ammunition fired in the Oswald Carcano—especially when, in the words of the Commission expert, "The cartridge is readily available for purchase from mail-order houses, as well as a *few* gunshops . . ." Harold Weisberg, in his book "Whitewash," asks: "Did it have anything to do with the discovery of similar cartridges loaded with bullets other than the ones the Commission presumed were used?" To this we can only add; "Perhaps a Mitrgliata bullet; or the "pallottola frangibile" (a frangible bullet), or the "ridotta," a reduced load cartridge loaded with a short range but multiple-composition bullet?

The assassination of President Kennedy triggered one other ridiculous program beside the Warren Commission; the program which has as its premise that anti-gun legislation could abolish crimes. Too many people forget that a gun dealer who complied with current firearms regulations helped the authorities trace the guns involved within a matter of hours. One wonders what would have been the case if Oswald had, because of severely restrictive legislation, purchased his gun from the black market?

The Oswalds and Whitmans are products of our sociological environment, not of our gun industry or surplus arms dealers. One may ask how much the almost useless and sometimes disturbing publication called the "Warren Report" has helped improve this sociological environment.

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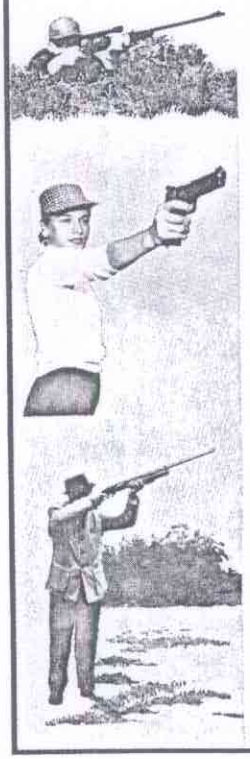

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